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Molly W. Andolina & Hilary G. Conklin

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Cultivating empathic listening in democratic education

Molly W. Andolina and Hilary G. Conklin

DePaul University

ABSTRACT

Grounded in theories that establish connections among democratic listening, relational dimensions of citizenship, and civic engagement, this mixed methods case study takes up preliminary findings from prior research and explores processes that allow for empathic listening in democratic education and the outcomes promoted by empathic listening. The case focuses on an action civics curriculum—*Project Soapbox*—implemented in a demographically diverse exurban high school. Findings highlight how, among both students and adults, listening to *Project Soapbox* speeches led to greater learning about and valuing of new perspectives, increased empathy, greater understanding across difference, and a deepened sense of connection and trust. The data revealed four inter-related conditions or practices that appeared to promote empathic listening: deliberate community building that surfaced students' values, the opportunity for all students to speak and be heard, active listening practices, and the willingness to be vulnerable and share personal stories. We propose a theory of empathic listening in democratic education and contend that empathic listening is a civic skill that can and should be taught. Further, we suggest that the humanizing form of empathic listening we describe here is one civic tool that could address the deep inequalities that plague our democracy.

KEYWORDS

Action civics; civic education; democratic education; empathy; high schools; listening

In our politically divisive and deeply unequal times, the way we approach educating young people to engage with one another as citizens has gained heightened significance. While current civic education practices have increasingly begun to include important pedagogies such as providing opportunities for student voice and democratic deliberation (e.g., Illinois General Assembly HB 4025, 2015), less attention has been given to a vital but elusive civic competency: the skill of listening. In particular, the capacity to listen empathically—a form of listening that enables emotional engagement and understanding—holds promise for bridging political, social, and economic divides and allowing all voices to be heard, not just those of the most powerful. In contrast to more academic forms of listening, teaching students to listen empathically can help them connect to the shared humanity that sustains our democracy.

Yet while listening has gained traction as a valued skill, there is little research that has intentionally and explicitly employed empirical measures to examine the democratic orientations that empathic listening fosters or the classroom practices that make such listening possible. As Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg (2017) noted, effective civic learning practices require "emphasis and accountability," meaning that "outcomes are somehow measured,

CONTACT Hilary G. Conklin hconkli1@depaul.edu College of Education, DePaul University, 2247 North Halsted, # 320, Chicago, IL 60614-3624.

assessed, and reported" (p. 6). Our research aims to contribute to this work by examining empathic listening in the context of civic education, using a range of quantitative and qualitative measures to explore the variety of factors that affect the cultivation, impact, and outcomes of this elusive skill. Prior research that we conducted examining a different set of outcomes (political and rhetorical) of a civic education program, *Project Soapbox*, surfaced the unexpected finding that the program fostered empathic listening (Andolina & Conklin, 2018, 2020). The work we present here builds on that initial finding to focus explicitly on empathic listening and to expand our prior analyses to better understand the associated context, processes, and outcomes. Grounding our work in research literature and theories tailored to empathy, listening, and related concepts, we explore the following research questions:

- What are the impacts and outcomes of empathic listening in democratic education?
- What are the processes and practices that allow for and promote empathic listening in democratic education?

We use the findings from these questions and our analyses to propose a framework for conceptualizing empathic listening in democratic education.

Theoretical perspectives

Civic competencies: From knowledge to skills

Our research is rooted in the debate about which competencies people require to participate thoughtfully in democratic life and how to cultivate and assess these competencies. Over time, the set of capabilities seen as essential for civic engagement has expanded considerably. Although political scientists have long privileged political knowledge as an essential precursor to civic action (e.g., Galston, 2001), Verba et al.'s (1995) Citizen Voluntarism Model established civic *skills* as key resources for political action. Following this seminal work, studies of political engagement began to include measures of organizational or communication competencies such as planning or attending a meeting, writing a letter, or making a speech or presentation.

As the importance of teaching civic skills has gained recognition in the civic education community, the number of skills under consideration has proliferated, as have the programs designed to promote them (see Kirlin, 2003, 2005). Notably, when the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and the Carnegie Foundation released a report on the "Civic Mission of Schools" (Levine, 2003), they called for greater instruction in civic skills but did little to detail what those skills should be. Almost a decade later, in the updated version of the Civic Mission of Schools report (Gould et al., 2011), the authors argued that civic skills, "include speaking, listening, collaboration, community organizing, public advocacy, and the ability to gather and process information" (p. 16). Now, studies from a broad range of disciplines have placed civic skills at the center of their analyses of political participation and civic education.

In a comprehensive review of the civic skills that are measured and evaluated across multiple fields, Kirlin (2003, 2005) identified four types of skills that researchers have examined: communication skills (e.g., public speaking, letter writing); organization skills

(e.g., planning and attending meetings); collective decision-making (e.g., working in a team, identifying and solving public problems); and critical thinking (e.g., evaluating public problems and taking and defending positions on public issues). While this inventory illustrates the breadth of vital civic skills that have gained recognition over time, the emphasis in both the scholarly work and curricular implementation has been largely on the cultivation of communication skills, particularly expressions of political voice.

Prioritizing youth voice and expertise: Action civics and Lived Civics

Instruction in political voice is, in fact, central to the rising number of civic education programs that come under the framework of action civics. Action civics programming is grounded in the perspective that civic learning, in which youth voice and expertise are valued and young people have authentic opportunities for expression, engagement, and reflection, is central to strengthening our democracy (i.e., Gingold, 2013; National Action Civics Collaborative, 2010). In action civics, students actually "do civics and behave as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection" (Levinson, 2012, p. 224). Although research on action civics is still emerging, there is a growing repertoire of studies of single programs that establish a link between action civics curricula and a host of promising outcomes, including civic skills such as public speaking and community mapping, social capital, political efficacy, and content knowledge (e.g., Berman, 2004; Blevins et al., 2016; Kahne et al., 2006).

The mounting consensus among researchers about the efficacy of action civics and the importance of youth voice is reflected in the recent emergence of the Lived Civics framework, in which students' personal and community-based knowledge of civic institutions and practices is acknowledged as valuable and used as an entry point for civic life (Cohen et al., 2018). The expanded understanding of students' democratic skills and orientations featured in the Lived Civics framework echoes Cramer and Toff's (2017) argument that the common conception of citizen competence, which has focused narrowly on political knowledge and the ability to make decisions based on hard facts, is out of step with both how people understand issues and the skills needed for democratic self-governance. Many years ago, Sanders (1997) argued for the importance of personal testimony in deliberation, a practice that Hess and McAvoy (2015) saw implemented in classrooms in which teachers viewed students' personal experiences as valuable forms of evidence. This understanding of the value of personal experience undergirds Cramer and Toff's (2017) suggestion for expanding the civic competencies that should be emphasized in civic education. They write that, because "democracy demands that citizens grapple with each others' experiences and perspectives" (p. 767), we should focus on teaching skills of listening—a relational skill to which we now turn.

Relational citizenship skills

The turn toward Lived Civics and Cramer and Toff's (2017) analysis reflect a growing convergence across multiple scholarly literatures on the importance of affective and relational dimensions of citizenship and corresponding skills. Allen (2004), for example, has argued for "political friendship"—a form of citizenship that is fostered when we "talk to strangers" in the context of established trust, reciprocity, turn-taking, equity, and

vulnerability, all in the service of a shared life. Hauver's (2019) recent work analyzing elementary classrooms as civic spaces builds on these themes, calling for the importance of fostering trust, empathy, epistemic humility, and exposure to diverse perspectives among children as some of the conditions that set the stage for civic growth. Similarly, Levine (2013) emphasized the importance of having trust among citizens, deliberation in the context of strong civic relationships, and reciprocity. As part of the need to develop these qualities in society, he argued that we should aim to increase listening, particularly to those different than ourselves.

Some scholars have proposed theoretical arguments for the centrality of listening skills as part of an expanded understanding of civic skills. Dobson (2012), building on the work of Bickford (1996) and Barber (1984), among others, argued that listening can positively impact four democratic objectives, namely "enhancing legitimacy, helping to deal with deep disagreements, improving understanding and increasing empowerment" (Dobson, 2012, p. 60). Good democratic listening fosters community, builds empathy, and contributes to a sense of reciprocity; it is not focused on achieving a goal (e.g., listening in order to develop a rebuttal), but instead allows the listener to engage, to consider, and to connect with the speaker (Dobson, 2012). This type of listening promotes understanding and allows individuals to bridge divides, which lays the groundwork for solving problems facing us as democratic societies. Importantly, many scholars highlight the relationship between inequality and democratic listening: it is often the more powerful in society who have the choice *not* to listen; yet choosing to listen actively and openly—particularly across difference—is a vulnerable yet vital act for improving democracy because it allows for a plurality of perspectives to inform the public realm (Bickford, 1996; Garrison, 1996).

The burgeoning interest in the relational citizenship skills engendered and associated with democratic listening parallels the growing emphasis on cultivating social and emotional learning (SEL) skills. The SEL domains of social awareness and relationship skills include the abilities to empathize, feel compassion, and listen actively (Weissberg et al., 2015) and are competencies that are well-aligned with the developmental needs of adolescence (Williamson et al., 2015). Well-implemented SEL programs have demonstrated not only improved academic outcomes but also greater empathy and stronger peer and adult relationships (Weissberg et al., 2015). While SEL competencies sometimes focus on individual or interpersonal skills—and have been critiqued for lacking attention to the broader civic realm (see Mirra, 2018)—as noted above, many of these competencies are also vital to the development of social trust, civic identity, and democratic orientations (Allen, 2004; Cramer & Toff, 2017; Flanagan et al., 2010; Levine, 2013).

From a focus on speaking to a focus on empathic listening in civic education

Despite these noteworthy expansions of the ways in which scholars have framed democratic competencies generally, and how to educate students for political life more specifically, the focus in both the civic education literature and the pedagogical practices of civics teachers has remained primarily on educating the student to be a speaker, with much less emphasis on the skill of listening. The role of listening has gained somewhat more attention in the democratic education literature. Looking at elementary classroom contexts, Hauver (2019) has drawn attention to children's willingness to listen to one another as one important aspect of their interpersonal civic development. Meanwhile, scholars who study classroom

discussion and deliberation at the secondary level have highlighted the civic competencies that students develop and practice when they engage in high quality political discussions because they are listening and speaking about public problems; through discussions, students learn to value diverse perspectives, interact with others with differing viewpoints, and move from self-interest to a conception of the common good (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2010). Parker (2010) has underscored the vital role that listening plays in classroom discussion, noting that it is particularly important to cultivate the skills for listening across difference. Even here, however, where listening has been identified as a valuable civic competence, its conceptualization in the civic education literature—particularly at the secondary level—has primarily focused on academic dimensions that prioritize the understanding of differing perspectives.

Our interest is in a form of listening that fosters a humanizing empathy and builds a sense of emotional connection among people. Psychologist Jamil Zaki argued that the term empathy encompasses several related responses: cognitive empathy, in which people can identify others' feelings; emotional empathy, in which people share and take on others' emotions; and empathic concern, in which people feel compassion and concern for others (Zaki, 2019; Zaki & Cikara, 2015). The latter two—emotional empathy and empathic concern—are our primary focus. Literacy and civic engagement scholar Nicole Mirra (2018) offered a conceptualization of empathy marked by "mutual humanization, or the idea that we cannot fully realize our own humanity unless and until we recognize the full humanity of those who differ from us" (p. 10). Similarly, in her book *You're Not Listening*, journalist Kate Murphy (2019) drew on the work of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to explain the importance of "experiencing the other," meaning:

> . . .engaging with other people face-to-face and learning how all our stories are different and yet the same in terms of underlying emotions. Listening to the "other" is what reminds us of our common human vulnerability and fragility, and it imposes the ethical imperative, or duty, to do no harm. (p. 198)

The development of listening and empathy holds promise for helping youth and adults alike to recognize each other's humanity and use that recognition to build a stronger and more just democracy.

Importantly, a focus on empathic listening must also account for inequality among groups. As Mirra (2018) explained in her conception of critical, civic empathy, we must consider power and "acknowledge the fact that the ways in which we are privileged (or marginalized) in public life inevitably influence how we interpret the experience of others" (pp. 7–8). Similarly, as Zaki and Cikara (2015) noted, when groups in conflict have different statuses or levels of power, efforts to foster empathy should explicitly address these asymmetries. For example, research that explored intergroup conflict among groups with unequal power relations indicated that one crucial approach to reducing conflict and improving perceptions of other groups includes giving those with less power the opportunity to *give* their perspectives so that those in power can *hear* the perspectives (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). Gibson (2020) spoke to this directly, promoting "a democratic pedagogy of counter-narration" in which students "*listen* to voices from the margins" (p. 441, emphasis in original). Importantly, Gibson emphasized that the focus on marginalization cannot be abstract but rather "requires attention to the individual, lived experiences of those who have experienced discrimination and marginalization" (p. 441). To implement democratic education that attends to power differentials, it is especially important to

foster the capacity and inclination for empathic listening among those who hold power in society.

In sum, our work is grounded in theories that establish connections among democratic listening, relational dimensions of citizenship, and civic engagement. Democratic theorists, as well as experts on socio-emotional development, suggest that empathic listening requires and allows for vulnerability, builds relationships, engenders empathy, and develops a sense of connection among individuals—democratic orientations that lead, in turn, to broader outcomes, such as building trust and bridging political rifts (Allen, 2004; Cramer & Toff, 2017; Levine, 2013; Weissberg et al., 2015). Empathic listening is a crucial vehicle for nurturing civic relationships. It is the strength of civic relationships, in turn, that generates the capacity for collective civic action (Levine, 2013) and politically transformative experiences (Allen, 2004). Taken together, there is strong evidence that listening is a civic skill that deserves greater attention by scholars and that we should be finding ways to actively foster empathic listening in civic education.

In this study, we investigate a high school curriculum to examine how the principles that theorists have articulated play out in practice, using a new set of quantitative and qualitative measures that are tailored to the concepts outlined above. Below, we discuss a range of promising outcomes and practices that our measures surfaced. We also examine some less robust findings and discuss possible methodological and substantive explanations for their shortcomings.

Research design

To examine the impacts and outcomes of empathic listening, along with the processes and practices that allow for empathic listening among diverse youth, we conducted a mixed methods, small, exploratory case study of an action civics curriculum in a demographically diverse, exurban high school (40 miles outside a major metropolitan city) in the upper Midwest. We selected *Project Soapbox* as the case to explore based on a previous study that surfaced the unexpected finding that this curriculum held promise for fostering empathic listening (Andolina & Conklin, 2018, 2020). The current study shifts the focus of our earlier work from an analysis of political orientations and rhetorical skills—using measures aimed at assessing those outcomes—to an expanded examination of listening. In so doing, we address our prior work's limitations for illuminating features of empathic listening; we have developed and adapted multiple indicators specifically designed to capture the conditions and outcomes of empathic listening. Additionally, here we have intentionally selected a community that offers greater opportunity to explore empathic listening among youth who occupy more varied social locations and are more likely to be listening across demographic difference. While our previous study featured schools in a major metropolitan city with almost all majority Latinx or majority Black student populations—a student sample with fewer than 10% White students and 86% economically disadvantaged students—in the current case, the school and student sample includes substantially more racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

Project Soapbox

The curriculum, *Project Soapbox*, developed by the Chicago-based nonprofit, nonpartisan Mikva Challenge, is a public speaking curriculum comprised of five detailed lessons that are designed to be useable as a standalone, week-long curriculum for approximately hour-long

class periods. Although *Soapbox* was initially implemented in Chicago schools, the program is now widely implemented in communities across the United States. In the curriculum, students choose a community issue of importance to them around which they will develop a speech. To prepare them for this task, students learn about the structure of good speeches; analyze sample speeches; learn how to use different forms of evidence to support arguments, how to grab audiences' attention, and use other rhetorical devices; outline and write rough drafts of their own speeches; learn tools for effective delivery of a speech; and practice delivering these speeches with their peers. Finally, students deliver their finished speech to their classroom of peers.

This culminating part of *Project Soapbox* makes it distinct from many civic education practices because it structures the necessity for students to listen to others; each student in turn delivers their finished speech to their classroom of peers. When students deliver their speeches, the curriculum encourages teachers to establish clear expectations among students that they listen to each speech without interruption, complete peer feedback forms for one another, and give "wild applause" after each speech is complete. Additionally, in some communities, including the one we studied, top speakers from individual schools advance to a multi-high school, citywide competition, which is judged by adult community members. These adults are recruited through Mikva's networks and include business people, lawyers, public officials, parents, clergy, or other community residents.

Students who take part in *Project Soapbox* typically do so either as part of a larger civics curriculum or as a single, stand-alone civics opportunity in their school. The curriculum is usually implemented by social studies or English language arts teachers who have chosen to incorporate it in their individual classrooms, although some schools implement *Project Soapbox* more widely across multiple teachers and classrooms. The majority of teachers using the curriculum incorporate it as part of their regular school-day curriculum, although some use it in extra-curricular contexts. In the case of the classrooms we studied in the current research, the school decided to include *Project Soapbox* in all of its high school government classes; thus, the students in this study were all participating in *Soapbox* as part of their required, school curriculum. Finally, it is important to note that we came to this research with some prior knowledge of and experience with Mikva Challenge but with no participation in the creation of *Project Soapbox* or its implementation.

Data sources

Our data from this exploratory case study include surveys of students from two different teachers' classes in the same school prior to and after participation in the curriculum ($N = 50$[1]), classroom observations (three observations each of two teachers' civics classes), student focus groups from one of the teacher's two civics class sections ($N = 2$), one teacher interview (with the teacher who taught the focus group participants), observation of the final, multi-school, district competition, and surveys of adults ($N = 11$) who attended and served as judges at the district speech competition. Although we had planned one additional teacher interview and additional focus groups with students from the other teacher's civics classes, the pandemic closed schools the day after our last student focus group, thereby ending our data collection prematurely.

Student participants were racially/ethnically diverse (27% White; 46% Latinx; 9% African American; 2% Asian; 14% multiracial) as well as socioeconomically diverse (22% of students' mothers do not have high school degrees, 29% have mothers with a high school diploma or the equivalent, 18% have mothers with some college, 22% have mothers with a college degree, and 8% have mothers with graduate degrees). Both teachers whose classrooms we observed are White. Our two focus groups included nine and five students, respectively; while we did not ask these students to identify racially/ethnically, they appeared to include White, Latinx, and African American students in similar proportions to the larger sample.

In order to examine the impacts and processes of empathic listening, we created and adapted quantitative and qualitative data collection tools that centered on assessments of empathy, trust, vulnerability, and student connections to each other. For example, pre- and post- survey measures included student reports on the frequency of classroom opportunities for getting to know one another and listening to others speak about issues of importance, how often they shared personal stories in class, and how often they felt empathy or understanding for classmates and their experiences. Post-survey-only measures explored the specific impact of *Project Soapbox* participation, with questions such as whether they learned something from *Soapbox* speeches that changed the way they understood an issue or concept, whether their feeling of empathy or understanding for classmates and their experiences changed because of *Project Soapbox* participation, and the extent to which they felt that participation in *Project Soapbox* helped them feel more connected to classmates. All the response categories were Likert scales with students reporting either frequency or agreement, as appropriate to the question. Because we were interested in many different aspects of empathic listening, we evaluated each item individually rather than creating scales.[2] Surveys of adult community members and judges attending the citywide competition probed the impact of listening on the broader adult community and included many of the same or similar questions to those on the student survey, such as whether the adults learned something from *Soapbox* speeches that changed the way they understood an issue or concept and whether their feeling of empathy or understanding for others and their experiences changed because of listening to *Project Soapbox* speeches.

For our qualitative measures, our observations of classroom instruction and the district competition were guided by an observation protocol we developed that focused our attention on the dimensions of empathic listening that guided this study, including listening behaviors, such as nodding or facial expressions; evidence of vulnerability, such as students sharing personal stories; and teacher practices that encourage empathic listening, ranging from community building exercises to asking students to put phones away. Although we were unable to observe the same classrooms together for this study, previous opportunities to observe the same classrooms implementing *Project Soapbox* in our prior study (Andolina & Conklin, 2018, 2020) along with our collaborative development of the current research instruments enabled us to develop a strong mutual understanding of the curricular and instructional features we sought to observe. Focus group interviews probed students' experiences with the curriculum and invited students to elaborate on survey responses.

We calculated frequencies for the post-survey data and conducted paired sample t-tests to measure change for items with both pre- and post-survey responses as is standard for analysis of two groups (Pearson, 2010) and is frequently employed in education research (e.g., Hoffman, 2015; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). As discussed in the limitations section,

our small sample size prevented us from being able to evaluate the data based on various demographic groups or conduct multi-variable analyses.

For the adult surveys, we compiled quantitative and open-ended survey responses. The audio recordings of the student focus groups and teacher interview were transcribed. We coded all qualitative data (interview transcript, focus group transcripts, classroom and district competition observation notes) using codes aligned with the theory that guides this study; as we reviewed these varied data sources, we coded instances of vulnerability, trust, community, connection, empathy, and equity/turn-taking. Similarly, we grouped all open-ended survey responses, examining the data for the presence or absence of those factors associated with the development of empathy and its outcomes. We then wrote analytic memos to synthesize themes, first within all data with the same codes and then across all of the coded data to describe the relationships among the key factors we were exploring.

Findings

Impacts and outcomes of empathic listening in civic education

While the findings are limited to a small sample, when taken together, the qualitative and quantitative data we gathered indicated that, for both students and adults in this demographically diverse exurban community, listening to *Project Soapbox* speeches led to greater learning about and valuing of new perspectives, increased empathy, changed perspectives and greater understanding across difference, and a deepened sense of connection and trust. Importantly, these findings provide systematic, empirical support for earlier research (Andolina & Conklin, 2018, 2020) that identified the potential of empathic listening in civic education and expands the population to include adult community members. First, as anticipated, when asked in the post-survey to reflect on the impact of the curriculum, a significant majority of students endorsed statements indicating their view that their participation in *Project Soapbox* had increased their empathy and understanding. About one-quarter (23%) said that their "empathy and understanding" for their classmates changed "a lot" because of their participation in the curriculum; an additional 51% reported that their empathy and understanding had changed "some." More pointedly from the perspective of listening, even larger numbers agreed that "listening to [their] classmates' *Soapbox* speeches" gave them a better understanding of "other people's experiences" (48% agree; 43% strongly agree) and helped them "better understand the issues that others face" (44% agree; 49% strongly agree). This expanded sense of understanding was not limited to students' personal connections to each other; overwhelming numbers reported that they "learned something from student *Soapbox* speeches that changed the way I understand an issue or concept," with 63% agreeing to this statement and another 23% saying they strongly agree (see Figures 1–3).

Thus, when asked directly to indicate the impact of *Project Soapbox*, students overwhelmingly endorsed the notion that the curriculum had affected their empathy and understanding. When comparing mean scores on items designed to capture these orientations in the pre- and post-surveys, there was a slight uptick in the recorded mean student response for how often they felt "empathy or understanding" for their classmates, from 3.02 to 3.22, but the increase fell just short of statistical significance (see Table 1). Overall, then, the quantitative findings indicated that listening to *Soapbox* speeches had

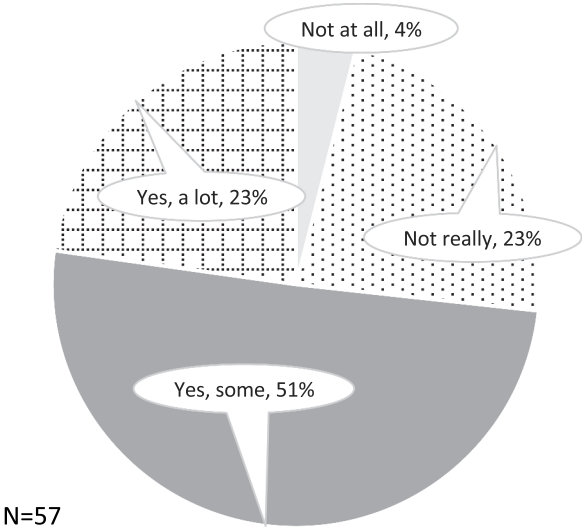

Figure 1. Student self assessment of empathy & understanding. Do you think that your feeling of empathy or understanding for your classmates and their experiences changed because of your participation in *Project Soapbox*?

a range of positive impacts on students' understanding of various issues and one another. We now turn to the qualitative data, which bolstered and elaborated these quantitative findings about the impacts and outcomes of empathic listening with this curriculum. We also discuss how the qualitative data provide insight into some of the mixed findings from the surveys.

Learning and valuing new perspectives

In the focus group interviews, students described how their participation in *Project Soapbox* helped them learn new perspectives that they had not known or considered previously. For example, two students explained:

> S1: It kind of got us thinking about different issues around the world and kind of closer in our community too. And so, it kind of just got us thinking about problems that are happening and solutions to fix it.
>
> S2: And you get . . . a different perspective about certain things. So, let's say if you only thought about something completely one-sided, then the facts that other people said it made like kind of, made you understand the topic better as well.
>
> Interviewer: Can you think of an example . . . ?
>
> S2: . . .one of our classmates, he did how crime was related to poverty. And obviously, I think a lot of people kind of associate those two together, but I didn't really know why. So, he brought the facts that kind of helped me understand more.

Students in the other focus group echoed the idea that listening to peers' speeches helped them understand new ideas and perspectives, such as one who said, "I thought the really cool thing about it was you get to see everybody's perspectives on all the issues around our communities and the state and countrywide." Another

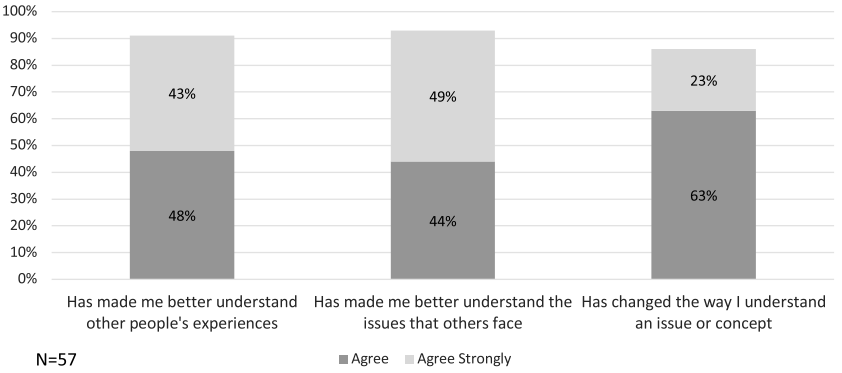

Figure 2. Student self-assessment of the impact of listening. Listening to classmates' speeches. . .

student summarized that, in listening to others, "it just brought new perspectives and I was like, whoa, I never thought of that."

Not only did students find it of interest to hear other perspectives and new ideas, but the focus groups also indicated that students deeply valued learning more about how their peers think about issues. When we asked, "what was more important: giving your speech or listening to others' speeches?" one student said:

> . . .listening to everyone else's speech. It was just more important understanding everyone else's feelings on their topic and where they were coming from. Because it was all stuff that we felt close on, so you got an understanding of what the person felt was close to them.

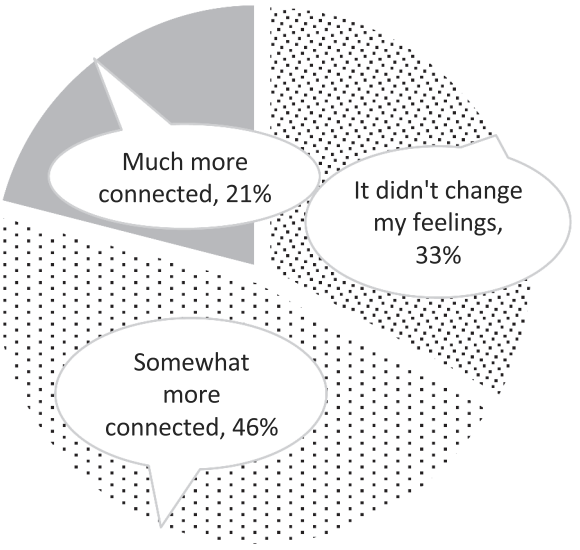

Figure 3. How much, if at all, did participating in *Project Soapbox* make you feel connected to other students in the class? $N = 57$; Note: no students selected "less connected" or "much less connected."

Table 1. Listening and sharing in the classroom.

How often would you say each of the following has happened, if at all?	Change	Pretest	Posttest	Significance Level
Shared personal stories in this class	0.46*	1.68	2.14	0.00
Listened carefully when a classmate is speaking	−0.06	3.50	3.44	0.57
Felt empathy or understanding for your classmates and their experiences	0.20	3.02	3.22	0.15

*$p < .05$. ($N = 50$).

Other students discussed how hearing new perspectives allowed them to see why someone might hold a different view than their own. Two students explained:

> S1: Really, even if it was something you disagreed on I feel like there's always two sides to everything and you're one or the other . . . for a lot of things you're passionate about . . . you just know the basics on why you disagree. So, it's kind of cool to hear why they're on that side, that —the side you don't normally would agree with.
>
> Interviewer: . . .are you saying that . . . even if you don't agree with them, you understood why they felt the way they did?
>
> S1: Yeah, because they explained it and you're like, oh, I never heard of that or . . .
>
> S2: Even if you did . . . sort of think about it before, I agreed even before his speech, but seeing how in-depth he went with it I was like, oh, yeah, for sure, now I understand.

As this exchange suggests, students appreciated hearing new perspectives as part of listening to their peers' *Soapbox* speeches.

It is important to note that a small proportion (24%) of students reported on the survey that they did not hear any *Soapbox* speeches that made them "value or respect the speaker's perspective, even if the perspective was different than [their] own." However, even among these students, half explained in their open-ended responses that they already agreed with most of the speeches, indicating that they already valued the perspectives they heard. Only one student indicated an unwillingness to consider an alternative perspective, but her explanation focused on the issue, not respect for the speaker, as the question asked. She explained that, "The only topic that went against my views was about abortion and pro-life and nothing can change my views on that topic . . ." The remaining students who responded "no" to this question did not provide any explanation, although one simply noted, "I just didn't care." Thus, in general the data suggest that most students valued hearing their peers' perspectives, and hearing these perspectives also appeared to be closely linked to another outcome that many students highlighted: developing greater empathy for others and their experiences.

Gaining empathy

The qualitative data shed additional light on the quantitative survey data finding that students believed the curriculum increased their empathy and understanding. For example, in the open-ended survey questions, when asked why they reported that participation in the curriculum led to changes in their feelings of empathy for classmates, many students made comments such as, "I think it opened up my mind a little bit and helped me understand that there are a lot of things people are dealing with and going through

that I'm not aware of. And because of this I need to see things from anothers [sic] point of view."

The focus group responses further illuminated how, for students, hearing peers' speeches personalized topics and fostered empathy, particularly when peers shared personal stories. One student indicated how listening to others' stories can be hard but powerful. She explained:

> It is kind of hard because wow, I have always seen you in the hallways and stuff and I never knew you had this situation with you . . . . [to] listen to somebody else's [story], it kind of like gives you a connection to the person, because you're like wow, that's personal and I can relate to something that is really serious.

Another student noted that when listening to something painful, one can sometimes feel a bit of that pain, too. He said, "It's almost like when you listen to somebody's personal stories, you allow yourself to put yourself in their shoes to get a really good feel for what they're talking about, and . . . you start to feel a little uncomfortable." Two students from the other focus group discussed how they saw this happening:

> S1: I mean, when we were at *Soapbox* we heard a lot about . . . deportation . . .
>
> S2: Yeah, there was a lot of racial inequality stuff.
>
> S1: —right, racial inequality. And you know it happens in our community and you know what's going on, but you don't really know who it touches or who it really impacts . . . personally. And so, to hear other people talk about it and you're like, okay, I knew that was happening, but I didn't know it was happening to you or I didn't know it was happening . . . right here.

Other students in the focus groups discussed how hearing personal stories from classmates personalized issues for them:

> S1: . . . it's more personal because it affects them, and so, it's like, yeah, you know about the issue but how does it affect someone firsthand?
>
> S2: Especially considering that we all can relate to each other on a level. . . . [one student's] speech was on depression . . . you hear the word depression, you're like, oh, I already know about this, we learned about this in school and . . . it's just a speech. But then when he starts speaking he's like, "Oh, yeah, imagine a kid going to the hospital so many times and attempting suicide so many times." And then you're like listening, and then he goes, "That person was me." And then you automatically go into shock and it's like, wow, he's our age and he goes to our school. And you hear several stories like that, and it really hits you hard, and it's like, these are real issues that are happening within us.

One student succinctly summarized the view expressed by others on the connection between personal stories and empathy: ". . . whatever personal stories are shared, then definitely you're going to feel empathy with that person and an understanding for what they're going through."

Observations from the district wide competition reinforced the finding that listening to student speeches fostered empathy among many listeners. Not only did we, as observers, find ourselves emotionally moved by many student speeches, the curriculum had an impact on the adult community members who served as judges at the district wide competition. Of the 11 adult judges—many of whom were civic or school district leaders—10 reported that listening to speeches deepened or increased their feeling of empathy or understanding for others and their experiences "some" or "a lot." According to their open-ended explanations

of this change, the personal nature of many speeches, in which students shared stories of suicide, bullying, the impact of deportation enforcement, and the effect of social media, among others, drove this impact. While one judge explained that "my empathy and understanding was reinforced," another explained that "the local and personal impact on issues made it real."

Students who reported that their empathy and understanding had either changed "not really" or "not at all," (27% of respondents) fell into three categories. In the first group, consisting of five students (9% of the sample), students explained that they marked this response because they already considered themselves very empathetic, and thus, the *Soapbox* experience did not change this. The second group of students (7%) who chose this response category attributed their lack of movement to the speakers, indicating that they did not perceive that their classmates truly cared about their speech topics or did not share personal stories that allowed for empathy. One of these students explained, for example, "There were not many experiences or stories told," while another noted, "not everyone did a topic that deeply resonates with them, and if it did, we probably wouldn't know." Finally, the remainder of students (11%) either did not provide an explanation for why their empathy had not changed or made a comment like "it's just the way I feel," which we were not sure how to interpret. Thus, on the whole, most of the listeners in this study reported positive impacts on their empathy as a result of listening to *Soapbox* speeches.

Changing perspectives and understanding across difference

While learning about new perspectives, valuing new perspectives, and gaining empathy for others' experiences were clear outcomes for students and adults listening to *Soapbox* speeches, in some cases, as the quantitative data illustrate, listeners also heard something that changed their ideas or helped them understand an issue across lines of difference. Indeed, all 11 of the adult judges strongly agreed ($N = 6$) or agreed ($N = 5$) that they learned something from student speeches that changed the way they understood an issue. Meanwhile, when we asked the 86% of students who indicated that their understanding of an issue or concept had changed to explain why they believed this happened in an open-ended survey response, some students focused on the substantive content of speeches. They explained that their understanding was changed because they learned about a previously unknown topic or gained new information or convincing evidence about an issue. For example, one student wrote about understanding global warming and its effect for the first time. Another explained that "I was presented with a lot of factual evidence," while another noted that "I didn't know there was a crisis in Yemen and now I do."

The bulk of the responses to these open-ended survey questions, however, focused on the fact that students' ideas changed because they heard new perspectives and listened to classmates' personal stories—explanations that mirrored many of the adult judges' responses to the same question. A student wrote, for example, "one of the speeches was about the stigma of depression and mental health, and I never really thought about it that way, so it opened up my mind and my perspective of it." Several students mentioned the impact of "personal stories." One student connected the stories to the issues directly, noting that "hearing stories about others' personal experiences with these topics, like seeing poverty and homelessness, made me better understand the issues in the world." Another student who self-identified as White wrote that "I had never thought about how for a White

person, learning to speak Spanish brings more opportunities while a Hispanic person speaking Spanish is seen as a bad thing."

There is also some evidence in these data that listening to speeches helped students value perspectives that were different than their own. For example, one Latinx student reported that "some speeches gave first-person experiences that I would not understand in the same way due to my background," and another Latinx student wrote that "you listen to that person's perspective instead of just your own," adding "it gives you a better connection with that person and statistic you never even looked for." One White student explained, "[My ideas] changed because I got to hear about something that I don't know much about and can't relate to, but now I can see how other people have to deal with these issues and how hard it can be for them." Another White student wrote, "on the topic of White privilege, even though I highly disagree with it, I could gain an understanding of it with the personal stories that were given." These comments indicate that, for some students, listening to others' speeches planted seeds for thinking about issues differently.

Students in the focus groups also discussed how they began to understand issues across lines of difference, such as one male student who described how listening to a female classmate's speech—a peer he described as a friend—expanded his perspective:

> I heard her speech . . . how women get portrayed as accessories in movies and stuff like that. And I never really thought about it, but when you sit down and realize it's always the men being the heroes and stuff like that. . . . when she started talking about it and naming all these examples, it really does make you realize a lot of things. All these different speeches make you look more into things than you usually do.

Another student, in an open-ended survey response, wrote, "My views on gun control and dieting changed because the people who gave the speeches had good evidence and were very convincing," while another student noted that the speeches "made me think about how depression is a terrible thing that affects many people you know really well." Meanwhile, another student summarized, "I came to value/respect everyone a lot more especially those with heavier topics—which were a lot." Thus, our data suggest that, as a result of listening to *Project Soapbox* speeches, some students and adults began to reevaluate some of their previous perspectives.

The small proportion of students (14%) who indicated in the survey that they did not learn anything from the speeches that changed their understanding of issues provided limited insight into why they gave this response. Most (12%) offered no explanation, while the one student who did explained that:

> I have a certain view on certain situations . . . Like for example, the topic abortion came up and the person speaking had their view on that it should only be allowed for certain situations, but my view is that I feel every woman should have the right to an abortion no matter the situation. I respected his decision because not everyone agrees with my views and my views are hard to change.

Notably, even though this student reported not learning anything to change her understanding, she indicated respect for the speaker's position.

Deepened sense of connection and trust

Finally, when considering the outcomes of listening to *Soapbox* speeches, our data indicated that one additional impact reported by many student participants and most adults was an increased sense of connection and trust. In some cases, both students and adults reported feeling connected to a student speaker because of a sense of shared experience with a speech topic. Many students reported feeling connections to the speeches their peers shared, such as one Latinx student who said, "There was a girl that read her speech about immigration and it made me feel valued because she was talking about something similar to me." Another student noted in a focus group that hearing others' stories seemed to deepen empathy for experiences one already knows intimately:

> For me . . . for the topics that were covered they kind of related to us, so I was really touched. For me, I kind of cried when I heard all the immigration stories, just because it's something like my race or whatever that I feel like we go through on a daily basis. It was just like even though we experience that daily, it was kind of hard to accept that that happens to people like us.

Some adult listeners also noted that *Soapbox* speeches made them feel more connected to the speaker because they "connected on a common topic"; one adult found resonance in a speech on student debt, noting that his own children are still "burdened by student debt" long after attending college.

While some listeners found speech topics connected them to a speaker personally, students in the focus groups indicated that participation in *Project Soapbox* also deepened a broader, existing sense of connection and community among classmates. Students attributed some of this connection to having insight into what others think, such as one student who said,

> I feel like it being a government class we talk about things and get to see who and who doesn't agree on stuff . . . we know kind of what everybody thinks and we all feel close because of that.

Students elaborated on how *Soapbox* speeches further enabled students to trust one another:

> S1: I was definitely nervous going up there, but once I actually started talking I was like, oh, these are my friends; I know them, like they'll understand.
>
> S2: Yeah and I feel like after we did *Soapbox* we talk to each other a lot more now. (several other students say "yeah" in agreement)

Other students explained how they were "super quiet" before participating in *Soapbox*, but connection and trust developed through participation, which allowed for deeper conversation. One student explained:

> . . .literally before *Soapbox* we did not talk to each other, I mean, unless we were friends and it was like a little bit here and there. But like, just the other day we had the Agree and Disagree [class activity] and we were talking and listening to each side of the story. And it was really good that we were kind of doing that Agree and Disagree kind of thing. But before we really didn't discuss deep into anything.

Another student discussed how hearing other perspectives creates community:

> . . .I think especially because we're given the opportunity to discuss a lot . . . it lets us see, like that we're just talking like two people with two different views . . . we're just two people talking about it.

The students' comments suggest that the more students share their perspectives and ideas with one another and hear from everyone in the room, the more people are willing to share —both personal stories and opinions—which leads to the development of trust, which in turn, engenders a sense of community and a greater willingness to share.

Processes and practices that allow for and promote empathic listening in civic education

In addition to exploring these impacts and outcomes of listening empathically in the context of the *Soapbox* curriculum, we also sought to understand those processes and practices that allow for and promote empathic listening. Our quantitative and qualitative data indicated four inter-related conditions or practices that appeared to promote empathic listening among the participants we studied: deliberate community building that surfaced students' values, the opportunity for all students to speak and be heard, active listening practices, and the sharing of personal stories and becoming vulnerable.

Community building by "showing your values"

Our data indicated that one important layer of groundwork that needs to be in place to foster empathic listening in civic education is deliberate community building practices. While the importance of community building for creating a productive learning environment is well-established, students' comments in the focus groups revealed that a critical aspect of community-building is being able to hear other students' opinions and values. One student explained that while not all students saw their class as a community, some believed that because they heard other students' opinions, it helped them to feel more like a community:

> We do a lot of things that require us to see the different opinions that are within the classroom. It's like hey, if you agree with this, go on the other side of the room and if you agree with the other thing, go on the other side . . . it's really neat to see what's going on in other people's minds and how they see a certain topic.

Another student explained that their teacher purposefully had them engage in activities in which they have to "show their values," explaining that, "[the teacher] facilitates all the questions to make it a debatable topic, so everyone has to show their actual values for it." Further, students noted that the teacher did many class activities that helped students interact with each other, share opinions, and build community. Students explained that their teacher tapped into their emotions and what they cared about. Sometimes, for example, she motivated them by telling them they were "going to get mad today:"

> S1: . . . her telling us that . . . it makes us want to talk more, because it's like we're going to get mad.
>
> S2: It's not like we get mad at each other and we are yelling, and it's not like that kind of mad, but it's more passionate. And so, it's an environment where we can discuss things we're passionate about . . .

Another aspect of community building was the level of trust that students felt in the classroom. The focus group participants noted that they felt a strong level of trust with their teacher and felt that she was open to students disagreeing with her. They explained that "she's

more human about everything," is "very open to hearing the other sides of stuff," and is "very honest, too—if she knows something is wrong, she'll say it, or she'll give us her opinion and ask us if we agree with her viewpoint or if anyone has anything to add." Further, she invites and encourages multiple perspectives. A student explained that:

> One of the big things she focuses on is trying to see things from more than one perspective. One of the things that she encourages like the first day of class was to learn about the news, but instead of learning it from the U.S. networks, to go to the BBC in England or learn about what's going on in America from Australia's viewpoint or Mexico's viewpoint . . .

Through these practices, it appeared that the teacher respected students and shared her own opinions in a way that allowed students to feel that she trusted them to develop their own views.

While this teacher deliberately laid a foundation of community-building and trust in her class, as suggested earlier, students indicated that participating in *Soapbox* deepened the sense of community and trust that the teacher had begun to foster because the curriculum allows students to learn about each other in substantive ways. Students get to actually learn what others think:

> S1: I feel like *Soapbox* in general, that whole curriculum portion of our class, just made it kind of like team bonding in a way just because people kind of let their guards down a little bit to speak in front of the class and talking on topics that affect their lives. It kind of just like pushed the wall down a little bit for us to get to know them in a way.
>
> S2: Yeah, for me, too. . . . [in] *Soapbox*, I listened to a lot of different perspectives of other people and you get to the point where you listen to them and you're like wow, it's so different and sometimes it changes your perspective because you're agreeing with that person. So, I think it does change your perspective of a person.

Further, hearing all voices in the classroom through *Project Soapbox* allowed for more open and involved class conversations:

> S1: During *Soapbox* I heard people speak who never really did speak in our class and stuff, so now I'm just more open to hearing what they have to say.
>
> S2: Yeah, I feel like after hearing everyone's personal stories and stuff, because I feel like that's what really connected me with the rest of the kids in the class. Not that I wouldn't have before, but I was more willing to hear what they had to say and they got to say their opinions on what we were talking about.
>
> S3: I feel like with this there's been more participation in class, because now, after *Soapbox*, they feel comfortable speaking in front of everyone else. People are starting to get more involved in discussions and the activities that we would do.

A student from the other focus group reinforced these ideas, noting that, if they hadn't participated in *Soapbox*, "I feel like we just wouldn't be as more open and talkative with each other, being able to talk about topics. And just not argue, but you know, share our viewpoints on what we feel on each subject." Thus, having a teacher who fostered community in intentional ways laid a foundation for trust in the classroom, which the curriculum then built upon and furthered. Hearing fellow students'—and the teacher's—perspectives, opinions, and values on substantive issues were critical to fostering this sense of community and establishing trust. The sense of community and trust, in turn, appeared to allow for more open listening.

Reciprocity/equity

As students' comments above suggest, part of what facilitated the building of class community was the fact that *all* students spoke as part of *Soapbox*—and, in turn, all students listened to each other. Comparing answers on the pre- and post-surveys, after participation in the curriculum, more students reported both having opportunities to listen and share. The mean score for student reports about the number of times they had the opportunity to share their own "experiences/attitudes" about an issue of importance rose from a mean of 2.52 in the pre-survey to 2.86 in the post-survey (see Table 2).

The student focus group interviews indicated that, just as with community building, their teacher purposefully created equity in the classroom, and students' subsequent participation in *Soapbox* reinforced and deepened the reciprocity and equity in the classroom. During regular classroom activities, students knew they would have an opportunity to speak. When we asked whether there is anything their teacher did to make it easier or harder to listen to classmates, a student explained:

> [Our teacher] makes it easier because she lets all of us talk. 'He'll talk first, okay, now you're next, now you're next.' We all get a chance to talk about whatever it is, even if we agree or disagree, we all still respect each other . . . So, we have a chance to listen to what we all have to say.

The students indicated that, because the teacher gave each student a turn to talk and they knew they would have an opportunity, it became possible to listen to each other better. When students then engaged in *Soapbox*, the teacher again created equity and the conditions for listening, which in turn made students want to listen. Students explained:

> S1: She just asks that we respect each other. (three students say "yeah" in agreement)
>
> S2: And . . . to have our phones in our backpacks or something.
>
> S3: . . .she did say, "Oh, everyone should have their turn," and she is strict about it sometimes in the way that she cares about it. And she wants all of us to be heard and hear others . . .
>
> S1:. . .we all had the opportunity to not listen, you know what I mean? You all have the opportunity to kind of tune somebody out, but I don't think anybody really did that. I think even though like, yes, let's put our phones away, stuff like that, gets us prepared to listen, some people still don't. But I feel like we did it and we were automatically like, okay, we're here to listen to each other.

Part of what appeared to motivate students to listen to one another was the reciprocity involved with speaking about issues that mattered to students, as this student explained:

> . . .we get to hear what [our peers] are passionate about and what they think is important, and they get to hear us back. And then we can – we have a different perspective of people who are similar to us or what they've gone through, so we can understand it better.

Table 2. Opportunities for listening and sharing.

In this class, how often have you had an opportunity to . . .	Change	Pretest	Posttest	Significance Level
Listen to another student talk about an issue that was important to them?	0.36*	2.86	3.22	0.02
Share your experiences/attitudes about an issue that is important to you?	0.34*	2.52	2.86	0.02

*$p < .05$. ($N = 50$).

The turn-taking in sharing perspectives that *Soapbox* allowed for appeared to open up all students to deeper conversation and fostered greater comfort by giving everyone practice speaking in front of one another.

Active listening

Another factor that appeared to set the stage for listening with empathy—and is linked to equity—were listening practices themselves. On one hand, when comparing mean scores on pre- and post-surveys, the mean score for students' reports of listening "carefully when a classmate is speaking" was mostly unchanged, with 3.50 in the pre-survey and 3.44 in the post-survey (see Table 1). However, when we moved from asking students about their own behaviors and instead asked them about how often certain "opportunities" were available to them, there is evidence that participation in *Project Soapbox* included increased opportunities to both listen and share. The mean score for how often students reported an opportunity to "LISTEN to another student talk about an issue that was important to them" jumped from 2.86 in the pre-survey to 3.22 in the post-survey, as Table 2 indicates. Clearly, students were aware of the increased opportunities to listen to other students share stories.

The focus group interviews shed light on the specific practices that students identified as being vital to feeling listened to. They discussed the importance of seeing heads nodding, audience members making eye contact, seeing eyebrows raised, and having audience members make comments about their speeches afterward. For example, when we asked whether students felt like classmates were really listening to them when they gave their speeches, they responded:

> S1: Heck, yeah. I was looking up and I saw everyone looking at me and I was like dang . . . .
>
> S2: The first time you see everybody in class just staring at you.
>
> Interviewer: So, is that good?
>
> S2: Yeah. The eye contact, that definitely gives it away and when you're talking about something about your topic, like a statistic or something, and the shock, you could see their eyebrows go up, those little reactions you definitely know they're paying attention to you.

When students felt others' eyes focused on them, it contributed to their sense of connection with others, as this student explained:

> I thought when you were speaking in front of everybody, that was probably the most connected I felt with the whole class, especially when everyone was staring at the speaker and you literally felt them listening. It was kind of weird.

The "weirdness" of being listened to may be because students often don't feel listened to, as this student suggested:

> It's cool to hear what everybody else thinks about it too. And like to come together, because then you feel actually like, like they're listening. Because when you talk to adults and stuff it's like, are they really paying attention?

Feeling listened to allowed students to feel that their ideas were being taken seriously, as this student noted:

> . . . just having everybody look at you and they kind of look like they understand. And then having one of my friends there like her, because we're always laughing. So, seeing her . . . taking

> me serious I was like, okay, I guess I'm doing good . . . In other classes there's some times when people talk over you or stuff like that when you're doing speeches and stuff. But I feel like when we did those speeches everyone just went silent and the attention was on them, and it was important.

Notably, as with the other practices discussed above, the teacher played a crucial role in fostering these active listening practices. Students felt that their teacher really listened to them, indicating that she was modeling listening practices. Additionally, the teacher had students write down details they liked from peers' speeches and give compliments, which helped students attend carefully to one another. At the citywide sharing of speeches, we observed teachers validating students' points after each speech, a practice that one student noted, "made you feel heard." Students explained that, when audience members made comments at the end of their speeches, "it showed how much they're interested in learning about it." As discussed above, these listening practices are linked to equity; all students have an opportunity to speak and they know this. The knowledge that they will have a turn makes it more possible to listen to others.

Willingness to share personal stories and be emotionally vulnerable

Finally, as the data we presented earlier on the impacts of empathic listening suggest, the personal stories that students shared as part of their speeches and their willingness to be emotionally vulnerable appeared to contribute to and set the stage for the empathy that others felt while listening. When comparing mean scores on the pre and post surveys, there was a clear uptick in how often students reported sharing "personal stories in this class." Prior to the curriculum, students averaged 1.68 on a four-point scale (with 1 being "never" and 4 representing "five or more times"). In the post-survey, the mean score on this item was 2.14, a statistically significant increase (see Table 1).

Some students spoke to the risk-taking involved in putting one's personal story out to be heard by others, such as one who said:

> I was afraid to at first because mine was on mental health and bullying. And I've been through that, so it was kind of scary to talk about, because yeah, they're my classmates and all like that, but it's like, I don't know what they're going to do with that information, like are they going to go tell somebody else? So, it was a really hard thing to do, but after the whole speech I felt good.

While students acknowledged the vulnerability of sharing personal stories, they also shed light on how much value they found when peers took those risks. Some students explained the greater power of speeches that included vulnerable elements, and they observed that more of the speeches that were selected to be presented at the citywide event had these elements. One student said, "some of us did share personal stories in our class, but [at the district competition], I literally cried during two or three speeches because they got so deep." Indeed, a speech in which a student spoke vulnerably about his own depression and the importance of attending to mental health issues—a speech that the focus group participants deemed "heartfelt"—won the "students' choice award," a marker of the value the students in attendance placed on this student's risk-taking and willingness to share difficult personal experiences, as well as the speech's power.

The adult judges from the citywide event shed further light on the power of students sharing personal, vulnerable stories. One respondent attributed changes in how they understood an issue and their feeling of empathy primarily to "[hearing] the speaker's personal

experience." Other attendees explained that, "It is one thing to hear soundbites in the media about an issue or topic—it is another thing to hear from a young person who feels/experiences that issue deeply and personally." This sentiment was echoed by another adult who also compared the speeches to the news media, remarking that "It is always humbling/humanizing to hear someone's personal experience with something you are mostly exposed to via the news." In addition, when the 10 out of 11 adult attendees who agreed that listening to the speeches made them feel more connected to the students were asked why they chose this response, many respondents attributed it to the students' "personal stories" and their "vulnerability." These results suggest that when youth are given the opportunity to speak in their own voice and adults listen, students' willingness to share personal stories and to be vulnerable with the audience opened the door to adults considering new perspectives, developing empathy, and making connections to the speakers—all processes that are significant democratic practices.

Limitations

Before discussing these results and their implications further, it is important to note several important limitations of this study. First, our sample size is small and limited to students from one school community; further, because we were only able to interview students from one teacher's class and their teacher, the elaborated insights we were able to gain are drawn from only one teacher's practices. In addition, the small sample size prevented us from conducting analyses among groups based on gender, race, or socio-economic status.

Second, our findings reveal the difficulty of measuring a hard-to-capture practice like listening and its associated orientations. For example, although there were statistically significant changes in some student responses before and after their participation in *Project Soapbox*, there are a host of measures in which we did not find support for changes in students' attitudes or behaviors. For example, in our pre- and post-surveys, we asked students to respond to a series of statements about class community, vulnerability, and empathy. Many of these measures, in which students reported their level of agreement on a four-point scale, were either replicated or adapted from other surveys. All of the indicators were essentially unchanged, either because the values remained stable or, in one case, the changes failed to reach the level of statistical significance.

Thus, while student reports and our other measures found important outcomes from listening, some of our pre/post measures captured little impact. We suggest a few reasons for this finding. First, some of our measures may not be well-aligned to the elusive qualities we were aiming to capture. For example, we borrowed empathy measures from the Toronto Empathy Scale (Spreng et al., 2009) that were designed to capture a static personality trait rather than a capacity that can be deepened (Zaki, 2019). As Zaki (2019) explained, although people do have differing baseline levels of empathy, experience can and does shape empathy over time. A second set of questions that revealed little impact indicated that students were less inclined to be open to listening to people they disagree with after their participation. We surmise that participation in the curriculum may have helped students gain a better understanding of the difficulty of listening to those with whom we disagree, whereas initially, students may have viewed themselves as "open" without having had substantial experience previously engaging in this practice.

Another reason that our pre/post measures may have been limited include our small sample size. Because of this limited sample, it was harder to reach statistical significance. The need to pair pre- and post-surveys through student names, as well as the fact that we collected names at the end of the surveys (which allowed students to drop out before completing the demographic section), narrowed our final sample to 50 respondents from our original 80.

Finally, it is important to recognize that *Project Soapbox* is a one-to-two-week curriculum—and thus a very brief intervention. Realistically, seeing statistically significant changes in pre/post measures—particularly in light of the issues we discussed above—becomes even less likely. Indeed, the listening skills we address in this study, while clearly a focus of this curriculum, ideally would be part of broader learning outcomes. We discuss this possibility further below.

Discussion

Taken together, our results provide empirical evidence from a demographically diverse exurban community that support many of the theories that scholars have put forward about the processes and practices that allow for empathic listening, as well its impacts. Building on and corroborating the unexpected findings that emerged among a more homogeneous student population in an urban context (Andolina & Conklin, 2018, 2020), the data from the present study indicated that, after listening to *Project Soapbox* speeches focused on community issues, participants learned about and valued hearing new perspectives, gained empathy for others' experiences, in some cases changed their perspectives and gained understanding across differences, and deepened their sense of connection and trust with one another. Further, our study adds new evidence to the research literature by pointing to several key processes and practices that allowed for these outcomes: deliberate community building practices that surfaced students' values, reciprocity and equity in speaking and listening, active listening practices, and students' willingness to be vulnerable and share personal stories as part of their speeches. The current findings not only uphold and expand on the results of the earlier study (Andolina & Conklin, 2018, 2020) in a new context among more diverse student participants, and now among adults, too, but they also provide the key contribution of *empirical* support for the theoretical pathway that grounded this study. That is, this research provides evidence for theoretical work that posits that empathic listening requires and allows for vulnerability, necessitates reciprocity and equity, builds relationships, engenders empathy, and fosters connection—and these democratic orientations lead to outcomes such as building trust and understanding across differences (Allen, 2004; Cramer & Toff, 2017; Dobson, 2012; Levine, 2013; Weissberg et al., 2015).

Additionally, our data point to the possibilities of a humanizing form of empathic listening as one civic tool to address the deep inequalities that plague our democracy and politics. In our interconnected but unequal society, these findings showcase how listening in the context of a civic education curriculum can amplify student voices—particularly those voices that are typically marginalized or ignored in society—and foster empathy among demographically diverse students, as well as adults. Our study demonstrated the impact of those with less power—in this case, minoritized students—having the opportunity to *give* their perspectives and having those with greater power—White students, male students,

adults—*hear* those perspectives, a finding that resonates with previous work (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). Indeed, the role of sharing personal stories in disrupting traditional power relationships aligns with Gibson's (2020) work on the impact of counternarration in relation to racism and bolsters her argument that "... our civic pedagogies must invite students to consider what they do not know and what they do not see" (p. 448). As Wilkerson (2020) explained in her book *Caste*, those who hold advantage and power in society have a "moral duty to develop empathy for those who must endure the indignities they themselves have been spared" (p. 386). She called for "radical empathy," which she defined as:

> Putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel ... It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it. (p. 386)

Our study suggests that, in many cases, listening to students' *Project Soapbox* speeches fostered emotional engagement and enabled this humanizing empathy to form among many students and adults, as well as across lines of difference and power.

While our findings point to the possibility of empathic listening bridging political, economic, and social divides, our current study cannot provide evidence of how empathic listening might lead to the collective civic action and politically transformative experiences that Levine (2013) and Allen (2004) propose. Indeed, it is vital that civic education include not only opportunities for empathic listening but also link such opportunities to instruction that helps students learn to translate empathy into civic action. Ideally, a program like *Project Soapbox* would be implemented as it often is—as part of a broader civic education curriculum that helps students identify issues of importance, provides opportunities for listening and empathizing with others, includes lessons on political action, and moves them toward informed action. Our data suggest a process that can lay the groundwork for achieving these larger civic impacts.

Thus, a key contribution of the work we present here is to propose a framework of empathic listening in democratic education that serves as a tool for elucidating the key constructs that can be explored in various contexts (see Figure 4). As our discussion above illustrates, we have drawn artificial boundaries between concepts that are necessarily overlapping and interdependent. Yet the framework provides an important mechanism for conceptualizing curriculum and instruction in order to foster empathic listening. It also provides an empirically-supported, theoretical framework that will enable future research to deepen our collective understanding of how to cultivate this vital civic capacity.

Indeed, one central contribution of this study is the finding that, as Zaki (2019) explained, empathy can be expanded—and one way that it can be expanded is through listening to others as a part of intentional classroom instruction in civic education. Given the brevity of *Project Soapbox* as a curricular intervention and the impacts we have noted here, we hypothesize that if empathic listening were a deliberate focus in civic education, repeatedly and over time, the number of students impacted and the depth of their learning would be greater. For students to learn any skill or capacity, they must practice it, apply it in multiple contexts, and repeat this practice across time (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018). What might happen if students had

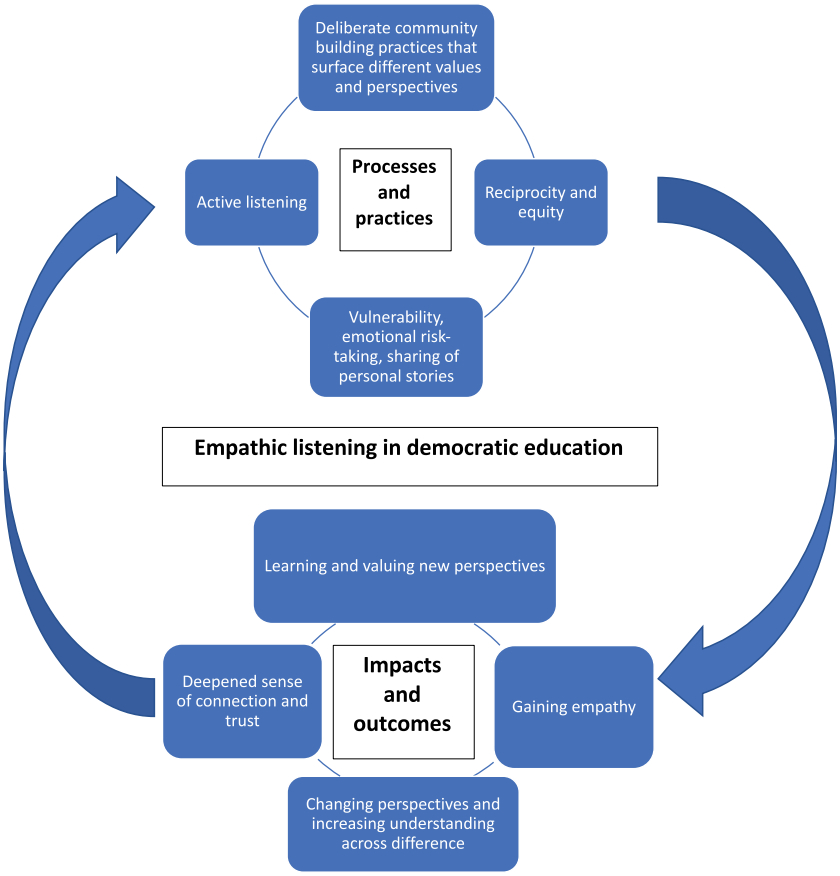

Figure 4. Theory of empathic listening in democratic education.

opportunities to practice listening empathically in focused ways across a semester, year, or school career?

Our study also contributes to the growing literature on the ways we might reorient civic education across the K-12 grade span to place a greater emphasis on listening and empathy more broadly, as well as fostering the conditions that further these capacities. Gibson (2020) has argued that many exercises in classroom discussion and deliberation are problematic because they have the potential to replicate broader societal inequalities and reinforce the power and status of the privileged. The *Project Soapbox* curriculum, by encouraging students to tell their stories—and having the audience listen empathically to these stories—offers one approach to starting to break down the power barriers that Gibson described. As the students in this study explained, after engaging in listening empathically to one another through *Soapbox*, they observed new voices and ideas entering into subsequent classroom discussions—suggesting the possibility that the *Soapbox* experience shifted the classroom dynamics that existed before the curriculum. Our findings also resonate with Hauver's (2019) conclusions for elementary level civic education that classrooms should attend to the conditions that will foster students' "mutualistic engagement" (p. 122) with others, including creating civic spaces that

allow for and invite risk-taking and provide opportunities to cultivate "empathy and epistemic humility" (p. 123). Importantly, Hauver (2019), too, argued for creating these conditions in light of the deeply unequal power relationships that she found shaping children's engagement in civic classroom spaces.

Although our findings indicate that *Soapbox* is a powerful mechanism to teach students the skills of empathic listening and provide opportunities for them to practice these lessons, it is not the only way to do so. Indeed, it may be best understood as an example of how adopting a broader conception of civic education to include instruction in relational skills and the listening practices that foster them can create a richer, more meaningful civic education for all students.

Conclusion

At a time when it has become increasingly clear that civic education programs need to consider how to cultivate empathic listening, our research provides theoretically-driven, empirically-tested quantitative and qualitative measures of this key democratic competency, tested in a demographically diverse community, thereby providing scholars, educators, and policy-makers with critical information about the processes, outcomes, and impacts of empathic listening for students and for the broader adult community. While a variety of civic groups have developed programs to foster listening among politically and socially divided adults, schools have done little to take up such work as a dedicated part of the civic education in which we engage youth. Our work points to the importance of what we prioritize in civic and democratic education: when we teach something explicitly, it demonstrates that it is valued and worth instructional time. Considering our society's deep inequalities, this study also suggests the possibility that, if we provide such instruction to the most privileged young people in society, they may learn that listening to others deeply is a fundamental responsibility as participants in democracy. By laying the groundwork for intentionally teaching students the vital democratic skill of empathic listening we hope to contribute to those who are working to help the nation bridge differences, build alliances, and focus on our shared struggle for the common good.

Notes

1. We collected 80 pre-surveys and 70 post-surveys from students. A number of students did not provide their name in either the pre-survey (10) or the post-survey (18), so their responses could not be matched for pre/post analysis. Ultimately, we were able to match pre- and post-surveys for 50 students. Post-only questions are based on the sample of 57 students who answered the relevant questions.
2. Copies of the survey instrument are available from the authors by request.

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